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WITH

SIDNEY LANIER,

BY

GUSTAF R. WESTFELDT.

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FIFTEEN MINUTES

WITH

SIDNEY LANIER

A PAPER READ FEB. 10, 1903, ON THE OCCASION OF UNVEILING A BUST OF THE POET AT TULANE UNIVERSITY, NEW ORLEANS

.....BY.. ..

GUSTAF R. WESTFELDT.

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FIFTEEN MINUTES WITH SIDNEY LANIER.

Mr. President, ladies, and gentlemen, it is to me a very great pleasure to see, in the occasion of this meeting, evidence that Tulane University has enshrined in her heart this poet, for the University and this poet are good friends to me; to each I owe very much.

Sidney Lanier has helped so many of us to hold our ideals higher than they would otherwise have been, and to carry these ideals into our daily lives, that I would I had the tongue of men and angels to bring to you some one ray that had escaped your notice of the gospel that he had to preach. If he were here he would, perhaps, tell us something of king Arthur, of his upbuilding and upholding of woman; of his loving service to God and man. Perhaps he might urge that he had found the sympathetic more uplifting than the critical attitude: the sympathetic attitude that helps us to see the best, the divine, that surely is in everybody and everything, and in return to give of our very best: that was Lanier's attitude: he rejoiced in his recognition of the good, and in return he has left us a few volumes, teeming with living thoughts written, literally, with his very heart's blood. Perhaps, if he were here, he might dwell on his "Catholic man, who hath mightily won God out of knowledge, and good out of infinite pain, and sight out of blindness, and purity out of a stain," he might present his view of the thought conveyed by this completeness of character. He might remind us that character has three sides: the cognitive, or intellectual: the feeling: and the willing, the energetic side: that these are the interdependent walls of the complete tri-

angular building of character. For instance he might urge that it is a good thing to *understand* the rising of the sun from the scientific side: to *understand* that the heat of the sun is the great chemist of the universe: to analyze its light, to *know why* it looks like a bee-hive and a bee at its first appearance, and then gradually assumes a round evenly lit appearance: but he would add, I think, that it is also good to *feel* the hope that the sunrise brings to our hearts, to *feel*, in it, the assurance of never-ending forgiveness, to soak in its increasing warmth, to be thankful, and to bend our wills to the day's *work*. As an illustration let me read just one stanza of his "Sunrise," his culminating work.

"Thou chemist of storms, whether driving the winds
a-swirl,
"Or a flicker the subtiler essences polar that whirl
"In the magnet Earth, yea, thou with a storm for a heart,
"Rent with debate, many-spotted with question, part
"From part oft sundered, yet ever a glob-ed light,
"Yet ever the artist, ever more large and bright
"Than the eye of a man may avail of: manifold one,
"I must pass from thy face, I must pass from the face
of the sun:
"Old want is awake and agog, every wrinkle a-frown,
"The worker must pass to his work in the terrible town:
"But I fear not, nay, and I fear not the thing to be done;
"I am strong with the strength of my lord the Sun—
"How dark, how dark soever the race that must needs
be run,
"I am lit with the Sun."

He might say, if he were here today, that it is a good thing to *know* the analyses of the different woods, to measure the annual rings of a tree, to study its life, to try to understand the economies of forestry; but it is also good to listen to the whispering of the leaves, to take sanctuary in the forest, to love the trees individually and collectively, to be at home in the woods; to give oneself over to the woodsy scents; to come out strong, at peace, and ready for the sacrifice; just read again his ballad of the "Trees and the Master," and be thankful. It is good to *know how* the rain rises to the clouds, falls on the mountains, lingers with the trees, and slips back to the shore; but it is also good to loll on the sands, to listen to the sea stories of the shells, to surrender yourself to the curling surf, to *feel* the glory of a header from the rocks, to listen to the moaning of the bar, and the baby prattle of the ripples, to soar with the clouds to the mountain tops; to see your sweetheart's eyes in the mountain springs; to sing the songs and live the life of the brook, and then to harness the water power for the mill that grinds the baby's bread. It is good to trace step by step, by the light of science, the lines of life back from today to what we call "their beginnings," because we can't see any further; but it is also good to *feel* that there must have been a primal, persistent, purposeful cause, a God who includes all, who is merciful, giving us *free wills* and *work*. The historian must not only *study* the dates of so-called "facts," but he must also enter into the inner life, the feelings of the peoples, otherwise his so-called "fact" falls to dust even as dead men's bones.

The doctor must be versed in his sciences, but his success is based largely upon his ability to enter into the feelings, to acquire the confidence of his patients.

How could the painter express his thought, his very self, on canvass without the technicalities of drawing, the feeling for color, and work, and work, and work again? Even in commerce you cannot describe a market by figures alone: the tone, the feeling, is quite as important as the price—and indeed very often the feeling is the most important factor in a description of a market; and, of course, the man who relies on statistics alone has a very short commercial career.

A friend of mine, Mr. Heileman Wilson, wrote a very short article on the genius of Lanier some twelve years ago; let me read a few excerpts from this article, that appeal to me. He says of Lanier: "He is no constant brooder over fate and destiny—there is present in him no doubt as to man's place or mission in life." "One of his most evident characteristics of greatness is the accuracy with which he can mold words into expressing the most subtle shades of meaning." "As to his conception of the mission of poetry he himself says 'my experience in the varying judgments given about poetry have all converged upon one solitary principle—that principle is that the artist put forth, humbly and lovingly, without bitterness against opposition, the very best and highest that is in him, utterly regardless of contemporary criticism.'" "To rob life of its misery and evil, to spiritualize it, was the dominant passion of his soul, and to this end he dedicated every power of brain and pulsation of heart." "He strenuously opposed the lawlessness

of love in that type which was portrayed and commended by Shelley, Swinburne, and Whitman. He was intolerant of an emotion which, for very self-shame, masqueraded under another name than its rightful one." "Lanier believed, as did Shelley in the perfectibility of man, but it was a perfection which was to be reached through other avenues than those into whose vistas the literary product of the French Revolution was continually looking."

Just think of some of the incidents of Sidney Lanier's life. First and always an unquenchable thirst for music, for knowledge, for self-realization in help to the world. I intentionally separate music and knowledge, for he maintained positively that music does not appeal to the cognitive activities of man, but to his feeling. Then a school where he knew he was not getting the best for which he was fitted. The war at 19— camp-life—battle—capture—languishing in prison—the well-defined beginnings of the disease that tortured him incessantly and finally killed him. The drudgery of law studies, most irksome to him—the wonderful search for and acquirement of knowledge—the self-education. The joy brought by the heart of a woman who understood him, believed in him, suffered with him, upheld him to the end, and who, since his passing, is giving her life to the work of spreading the skirts of his gospel-light. Then the separations made necessary by his search for health, and by poverty, absolute poverty. Let me read just a page or two of his referring to this period from an early unrevised poem entitled, "June Dreams in January;"—the young poet had just finished a few verses and soliloquizes thus:

Then he that wrote laid down his pen and sighed;
And straightway came old Scorn and Bitterness,
Like Hunnish kings out of the barbarous land,
And camped upon the transient Italy
That he had dreamed to blossom in his soul.
"I'll date this dream, he said; so: 'Given, these,
On this, the coldest night in all the year,
From this, the meanest garret in the world,
In this, the greatest city in the land,
To you, the richest folk this side of death,
By one, the hungriest poet under heaven,
—Writ while his candle sputtered in the gust,
And while his last, last ember died of cold,
And while the mortal ice i' the air made free
Of all his bones and bit and shrunk his heart,
And while soft Luxury made show to strike
Her glov-ed hands together, and to smile
What time her weary feet unconsciously
Trod wheels that lifted Avarice to power,
—And while, moreover,—O thou God, thou God—
His worshipful sweet wife sat still, afar,
Within the village whence she sent him forth
Into the town to make his name and fame,
Waiting, all confident and proud and calm,
Till he should make for her his name and fame,
Waiting—O Christ, how keen this cuts!—large-eyed,
With Baby Charley till her husband make
For her and him a poet's name and fame.'
—Read me," he cried, and rose, and stamped his foot
Impatiently at Heaven, "read me this,"
(Putting th' inquiry full in the face of God)
"Why can we poets dream us beauty, so,

But cannot dream us bread? Why, now, can I
Make, aye, *create* this fervid throbbing June
Out of the chill, chill matter of my soul,
Yet cannot make a poorest penny-loaf
Out of this same chill matter, no, not one
For Mary though she starve upon my breast?"
And then he fell upon his couch, and sobbed,
And, late, just when his heart leaned o'er
The very edge of breaking, fain to fall,
God sent him sleep. There came his room-fellow,
Stout Dick, the painter, saw the written dream,
Read, scratched his curly pate, smiled, winked, fell on
The poem in big-hearted comic rage,
Quick folded, thrust in envelope, addressed
To him, the critic-god, that sitteth grim
And giant-grisly on the stone causeway
That leadeth to his magazine and fame.
Him, by due mail, the little Dream of June
Encountered growling, and at unawares
Stole in upon his poem-battered soul
So that he smiled,—then shook his head upon't
—Then growled, then smiled again, till at the last,
As one that deadly sinned against his will,
He writ upon the margin of the Dream
A wondrous, wondrous word that in a day
Did turn the fleeting song to very bread,
—Whereat Dick Painter leapt, the poet wept,
And Mary slept, with happy drops a-gleam
Upon long lashes of her serene eyes,
From twentieth readings of her poet's news
Quick-sent, "O sweet, my Sweet, to dream *is* power,

And I *can* dream thee bread and dream thee wine,
And I *will* dream thee robes and gems, dear love,
To clothe thy loveliness withal,
And I *will* dream thee *here* to live by *me*,
Thee and my little man thou hold'st at breast,
—Come, Name, come Fame, and kiss my Sweetheart's feet!'

Then the generous appreciative helping hand of the Johns Hopkins University, that enabled him to live and work for a few years. If you know the story of how he had to nurse every pound of physical energy in order to last through an hour's lecture, you know something of this brave man's heart. Then death at last came to him in the shadow of the Blue Ridge. At noon the day before he died my mother received, by stage coach, a letter from our lifelong friend, Mrs. Lanier, who was about 30 miles away. At once my mother sent me on horseback over the hills, saddle bags packed with stimulants and tonics. It is a beautiful ride from the valley of the French Broad over the shoulder of Tryon Mountain to the Atlantic watershed. I found Mr. Lanier far gone, propped up in a chair, he could only speak by snatches—he was glad to see me, talked much of my father, whom he thoroughly appreciated, and whom he and Mrs. Lanier have honored most lovingly in the dedication of "Sunrise." Next morning was bright and sunny, he was very earnest in his thanks for a few morning-glories picked on his porch; said they were his favorite flowers, called the view of the mountains through the bay-window "his com-

pensation," spoke of others, not of himself. Just we three were there; at about ten o'clock that morning he was free to float by his friend, the Sun. You remember the last lines of the "Sunrise?"

"And ever by day shall my spirit, as one that hath tried thee,
Labor, at leisure in art,—till yonder beside thee
My soul shall float, friend Sun,
The day being done."

Now with the picture of his life in mind, think of the optimistic attitude of the man; doesn't it shame us that sometimes those of us who are strong enough, and moderately sure of the immediate needs of daily life, lose heart and sink into hopelessness? And how was it that he attained and kept this optimistic attitude? To my mind it seems because he recognized the beauty of building up and maintaining the three sides of character, namely: the cognitive, or knowing side—the feeling side—and the willing side, the side of energy. If any man depends on any one, or any two of these sides, it seems to me that he is apt, ultimately, to sink into hopelessness; but the man who strives to build up and maintain these three sides equally, will, in my opinion, surely develop the divine that is in him, and, perhaps, that is optimism. Let us keep this energetic, loving, thoughtful man in mind, and listen to his words and to his life. Truly a couplet of his own most aptly describes him:

"His song was only a living aloud
His work, a singing with his hand."

SIDNEY LANIER

was born at Macon, Ga., in 1842; died at Lynn, N. C., in 1881.

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